

Michael Slobodian: A Case History

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Michael Peter Slobodian grew up in an intact family, the youngest of four children.¹ He had two brothers, Gary and Mark, and a sister, Dona. I have found virtually no information available about them, or about their parents (Peter and Lillian²). Nor have I found information on Slobodian's childhood.

As is often the case, there are mixed reports about his social life. A classmate commented, "He was a quiet kid, you hardly noticed him."³ A peer said, "We used to call him 'Priest' ... He always acted in such an aloof, solitary sort of way."⁴ Neighbors reportedly saw him as a loner.⁵

Despite these reports, however, Slobodian had friends. In fact, a friend named Peter was at Slobodian's home the night before the attack, and the next morning Peter "walked with Slobodian to school and the youth appeared happy and talked about girls."⁶ A female said she used to walk home with Slobodian sometimes, commenting, "He seemed pretty nice to me. Pretty easygoing."⁷ Another female friend was a girl who dated Slobodian in junior high school; after the romance ended, they continued to be friends, and she hung out with him the day before his attack.⁸ A neighbor who knew Slobodian was incredulous that he went on a rampage: "I wouldn't have believed a word of it ... They didn't make anybody better than Mike."⁹ According to Slobodian's sister, Dona, "he had lots of friends."¹⁰

Slobodian had a number of interests. He liked folk music and played guitar;¹¹ he also played drums in a band with his brothers.¹² He reportedly was "a karate expert."¹³ Also, "everybody knew that Mike was interested in guns."¹⁴ The month before the shooting,¹⁵ Slobodian joined a local militia, the Lorne Scots Regiment.¹⁶ The militia was not Slobodian's first exposure to firearms: "Guns were kept in the basement of the Slobodian home and Michael often went hunting with his father."¹⁷

At school, Slobodian reportedly was bright and a better-than-average student, but he often skipped classes.¹⁸ To cover

himself, he began "handing in fake and increasingly far-fetched excuse notes allegedly written by his parents."¹⁹ One of the forged notes said, "Please excuse Michael's absence from your classes ... He has contracted a blood disease which causes fever and blistering on his hands. If you notice he is in an unusual state, please advise him to return home."²⁰ According to one source, he forged at least thirty-five notes.²¹ Years later, a peer said, "We both got in trouble a lot,"²² but did not report why.

Slobodian most frequently skipped English and physics, taught by Margaret Wright and Ross Bronson, respectively. He apparently had complex relationships with both teachers. Slobodian had failed physics the first term, and Bronson "had nailed" him for skipping classes.²³ Despite this, Slobodian reportedly was an enthusiastic science student and was eager to

MICHAEL SLOBODIAN

Date: **28 May 1975**
School: **Centennial Secondary School**
Location: **Brampton, Ontario**
Age: **16**
Killed: **2**
Wounded: **13**
Outcome: **Suicide**
Shooter population: **Secondary school**
Psychological type: **Psychopathic?**
Attack type: **Mixed** (targeted a teacher; shot random students)

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see "About the Site" at schoolshooters.info.

enter a science fair. His proposed experiment, however, involved dissecting live frogs, which was against ethical standards. Bronson told Slobodian his proposal was unacceptable. Whether or not this angered Slobodian is unknown. Twenty-four years after the attack, Bronson commented that the science fair issue “was played up at the time . . . but I doubt it played a part in what happened.”²⁴

Regarding Slobodian’s relationship with Margaret Wright, he apparently had both positive and negative feelings toward her. She reportedly “was Michael’s confidante, a teacher he was said to like and respect.”²⁵ Not long before his attack, he had a private talk with her in which he tearfully told her about the recent death of his grandfather (on 1 May).²⁶ According to a former classmate who was interviewed thirty-two years later, Wright had criticized Slobodian’s work in front of the class.²⁷ Whether or not this was routine commentary on a student’s work or something harsher is not known. There is apparently no evidence that Wright was harsh or inappropriate; in fact, she was “described by the principal as a wonderful first-year teacher.”²⁸

Besides issues with Bronson and Wright, a classmate said that a week before the rampage, Slobodian “told me everything was going wrong. He had his 10-speed bike stolen and his driver’s class had been cancelled.”²⁹ These events may have been minor, but they may have contributed to Slobodian’s growing anger. In addition, the day before the shooting, Slobodian was upset about two teachers giving him zeroes on assignments that he handed in late; he reportedly said, “I’m so mad I could just kill them.”³⁰ Whether or not the two teachers were Bronson and Wright is unknown. Not only was the death of his grandfather an apparent stressor, but his father had had two heart attacks and was scheduled for heart surgery the next month.³¹

The immediate trigger for Slobodian’s attack seems to have been Wright’s calling his mother to report that he had been skipping her class. After this, Slobodian left school, went home, and talked with his mother about the telephone call, admitting that he had been cutting classes.³² While home, Slobodian wrote a note that said (in part): “My life is now gone to pot. I am going to eliminate certain people from this world. Those people are: Mrs. Wright, Mr. Bronson and any other sucker who gets in my way.”³³ He then got his guns, changed into military gear, and returned to school where he killed Mrs. Wright and shot fourteen other people, killing one student. He was unable to locate Mr. Bronson.



Does Michael Slobodian fit into my typology of school shooters? There is no evidence that he was traumatized or psychotic. Is there evidence of psychopathic personality traits? Perhaps, but without more information this is at best a tentative hypothesis.

Slobodian’s most obvious misconduct involved his skipping classes and forging absence notes. This indicates a clear pattern of rule-breaking and deceptive behavior that is reminiscent of that of Robert Steinhäuser, a German shooter with a long history of truancy who got caught forging a doctor’s note to excuse an

absence. Furthermore, the nature of his notes deserves a closer look. On one hand, his excuses were a way to cover himself and avoid disciplinary consequences. On the other hand, if this were their only purpose, why would he write implausible excuses that were likely to raise questions among his teachers? Perhaps Slobodian enjoyed seeing how far he could go with strange excuses, seeing this as an entertaining game. He may have simply gotten a kick out of fooling people. Among psychopaths, this has been called “duping delight,” referring to getting pleasure out of deceiving others.³⁴

Like many psychopathic shooters, Slobodian appears to have had issues with authority figures, focusing his rage on teachers. In addition, psychopaths typically fail to take responsibility for their own behavior. Even when they acknowledge their guilt, they still manage to feel like victims of injustice.³⁵ This appears to have been true of Slobodian, who admitted to his mother he was guilty of skipping classes, but still felt justified in killing the teacher who reported him. It appears that Slobodian could not stand being held accountable; he felt victimized by the legitimate consequences of his own behavior and responded with homicidal urges.

Perhaps Slobodian had the psychopathic trait of believing he was entitled to do whatever he wanted and objecting to any limits on his behavior. He may have expected to skip class and hand assignments in late without consequences, and do whatever scientific experiment he wanted. In addition, his desire to experiment on living creatures suggests a lack of empathy and a possible sadistic streak.

As noted above, a peer commented that he and Slobodian were frequently “in trouble.” This might have been ordinary misbehavior, but it might indicate a general disregard for rules and authority such as that seen among psychopaths. Also, no one among his peers, teachers, or family saw any hint of his rage or violent urges. This suggests that he was very good at impression management, hiding his darker self behind a façade of pleasant normality. Impression management is a common feature among psychopaths.

In *School Shooters*, I present commonalities among psychopathic shooters and school shooters in general. Slobodian fits several of these. First, he was raised in a family where firearms had a prominent place and were used legally. Most teenage psychopathic shooters grew up with firearms in the family that were used appropriately. (In contrast, many traumatized shooters grew up in families where older male relatives used firearms illegally.)

Also, many school shooters, particularly those who were psychopathic, were either unusually small or had significant medical problems that often threatened their identities as males (e.g., deformed chests, fear of sterility). A friend of Slobodian’s commented, “He was small. He was a small kid.”³⁶ Apparently he was self-conscious about being short, because he reportedly “wore platform boots to make himself look taller.”³⁷

In addition, many shooters had military aspirations, and Slobodian fits this pattern, having joined a militia the month

before his attack. The frequent combination in the lives of shooters of threats to their masculinity in the form of short statures or other biological challenges, and military aspirations, raises the possibility that many shooters saw the military as a way of establishing a solid masculine identity. The fact that Slobodian changed into military gear to carry out his attack, and had been dressing in it frequently even when not attending the militia,³⁸ suggests that this was significant to his identity. Similarly, his interest in karate may have had the same function. For example, Kip Kinkel was unusually small as a child and his parents enrolled him in karate to boost his self-esteem and physical ability.

Slobodian reportedly had used drugs in the past. His friend, Peter, reported that Slobodian used marijuana and LSD two years before his attack, and “THC” several days before the rampage.³⁹ Despite his reported prior use, he was not under the influence of any illegal drugs at the time of his attack. Nonetheless, approximately half of the shooters I’ve studied used drugs and/or alcohol, and Slobodian’s substance use may have affected his mood or overall functioning.

Why did he kill himself? Slobodian’s suicide note stated that after shooting people, “I am then going to kill myself so as not to be imprisoned. I am not insane but just strictly fed up with life. I am not getting myself anywhere and its my fault.”⁴⁰ What he meant by stating that he was not getting anywhere is unknown. Perhaps he saw that he was digging himself into a hole and knew deep down that he had no one to blame but himself. Other psychopathic shooters have been disillusioned with life, with the world, and/or with themselves. Though they saw no point in living, they didn’t want to exit life quietly, preferring to explode in fury, seeking vengeance, fame, or simply the release of their rage.

The lack of information on Michael Slobodian severely limits the analysis of his personality. I have shown how his behavior might be indicative of psychopathic traits, but this remains a tentative hypothesis.

NOTES

- 1 “High School Gunman Kills 2, Wounds 13,” *Beaver Country Times*, 29 May 1975, p. 8.
- 2 Lynda Hurst, “It Did Happen Here: The High School Shootings in Littleton, Colo., and Taber, Alta., Have Revived Memories of Our Own School Tragedy, 24 Years Ago,” *Toronto Star*, 1 May 1999, p. 1.
- 3 “Lad in Ontario Shooting Spree Called Above-Average Student,”

The Lewiston Daily Sun, 29 May 1975, p. 27.

- 4 “High School Gunman Kills 2.”
- 5 “High School Gunman Kills 2.”
- 6 “High School Gunman ‘A Beautiful Boy,’” *Lethbridge Herald*, 24 June 1975, p. 2.
- 7 Bob Cohen, “Brampton Asks: Why Did They Die?” *The Windsor Star*, 29 May 1975, p. 1.
- 8 Andrew Hanon, “Canada’s First School Shooting Recalled,” *Canoe Network*, 12 March 2009.
- 9 Cohen, “Why Did They Die?”
- 10 <http://signofthetimes.yuku.com/topic/729#.U6xwavsUgpE>.
- 11 Cohen, “Why Did They Die?”
- 12 Hurst, “It Did Happen Here.”
- 13 “High School Gunman Kills 2.”
- 14 Cohen, “Why Did They Die?”
- 15 Cohen, “Why Did They Die?”
- 16 “Revisiting a Canadian Tragedy,” CBC, 22 April 2007.
- 17 “Lad in Ontario Shooting Spree.”
- 18 “Lad in Ontario Shooting Spree.”
- 19 Hurst, “It Did Happen Here.”
- 20 Hurst, “It Did Happen Here.”
- 21 Mary Martin, “The 1990 Kirpan Case: Cultural Conflict and the Development of Equity Policy in the Peel District School Board.” Doctoral thesis, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2011, p. 42.
- 22 “Revisiting a Canadian Tragedy.”
- 23 Hurst, “It Did Happen Here.”
- 24 Hurst, “It Did Happen Here.”
- 25 Martin, “The 1990 Kirpan Case,” p. 44.
- 26 Hurst, “It Did Happen Here.”
- 27 “Revisiting a Canadian Tragedy.”
- 28 Martin, “The 1990 Kirpan Case,” p. 44.
- 29 <http://signofthetimes.yuku.com/topic/729#.U6xwavsUgpE>.
- 30 Hanon, “Canada’s First School Shooting.”
- 31 Cohen, “Why Did They Die?”
- 32 “A Beautiful Boy.”
- 33 “Michael Slobodian’s Suicide Note.” Available on schoolshooters.info.
- 34 Robert Hare, *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us*. New York: Guilford, 1993, p. 46.
- 35 Hare, *Without Conscience*, pp. 40–44.
- 36 “Revisiting a Canadian Tragedy.”
- 37 <http://signofthetimes.yuku.com/topic/729#.U6xwavsUgpE>.
- 38 “Revisiting a Canadian Tragedy.”
- 39 “A Beautiful Boy.”
- 40 “Michael Slobodian’s Suicide Note.”